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THEODORE ROBINSON

The last meeting I had with Theodore Robinson was both a pleasure and a pain. It was a pleasure, because he never spoke to me with greater freedom or with deeper feeling; it was touched with sadness, because as I listened to his labored breathing and looked into his pale face I was aware of the overshadowing presence of death.

We had been congenial acquaintances for several years. He was also a Wisconsin man, at least he had spent his youth and early manhood in a small village a few miles below Madison, and still retained a love for the suave and grassy hills and fields of that region. He was a lover of unaffected, manly, and simple art. His eye was clear and sane, and his hand uncommonly cunning and certain in its action. I admired his skill and his sound and buoyant color sense. His painting was, like himself, direct, simple, yet not without quiet courage. He had been profoundly influenced by Monet, but his own personality had been developed, not overlaid, by his master instructor.

Over our coffee and cigars—the coffee mine, the tobacco his—we fell into the frankest talk. He asked me to speak fully concerning his work. His was a nature that invited talk, he listened easily, and was slow to dispute. I told him candidly that I thought his themes unworthy the skill and study he had given them. I said in effect, "I know the contention that the artist is the essential, that the subject is less important than the art with which it is treated, etc., to all of which, in a certain measure, I am willing to subscribe, but my own feeling is the subject should be at least worthy of the treatment." I restated my conviction that the artist, no matter how fine his technique, could not do himself justice, much less be an enlightenment and a joy to his public unless he painted subjects which he loved so deeply that the pleasure of reproducing them offset the drudgery of laying paint to canvas, etc.

Robinson smoked quietly during my harangue, but at the end of it he said, "I quite agree with you, at least on the main points. All I have done up to this year's work has not been an emotional statement of myself; I have not *felt* my subjects. This year I got back among the hills I knew when a boy—I was born in Vermont—and I am just now beginning to paint subjects that touch me. I have chosen my subjects hitherto because they were good subjects for painting; now I am painting subjects that are something more than 'good bits.' There is a mysterious quality in the landscapes of one's native place—you quoted something from Whitman once, what was it?"

I tried to recall it in substance, at least, "You go round the earth; you come back to find the things nearest at hand the sweetest and best after all."

"That is what I mean. All I have done seems cold and formal to me now. What I am trying to do this year is to express the love I have for the scenes of my native town." The exertion of speaking made his breathing painful to hear, but his eyes glowed with inward light. "Of course a painter is always a painter, or should be, and I shall not treat these subjects in a literary way. The limitations of paint are narrow; probably I can't do what a man of your temperament wishes me to do, but I recognize the emptiness of much of our landscape art. We mustn't let down on our demand for good drawing and right color, but we can pull up on the quality of our subjects."

This was the substance of our talk, but the words the painter spoke need to be supplemented by my own impression of his passionate eagerness to live long enough to finish the work he had set his hand to do. His slender body was even then tremulous with weakness, but his brain was never more intensely active and his soul never more vividly aglow. Perhaps he knew that his days were numbered, and the numbers few. He died soon after, leaving nearly a score of paintings of his native woods and hills. I have not seen them, but his message will have potency, even if it shall appear that he was unable, after all, to express on canvas his change of attitude toward the art of painting landscapes.

HAMLIN GARLAND.

NOTE.—Robinson was a pupil of Carolus, Duran, and Gérôme, but he broke away from the school represented by those painters and cast his fortunes with the impressionists. Yet he was a sane impressionist. He never painted purple cows and scarlet grass; he never saw sky-colored streaks in the hair of red-headed girls, nor did he go about clamoring in the ears of the multitude that impressionism was the only art; that the painters who were careful and exact and who painted things as they appeared were frauds and fogies. He was, on the contrary, a reserved young man, who intruded his views on nobody, and was nearly as frugal with his pictures as with his opinions. He was modest and moderate in his art, and there is so much good in his pictures, so much that is true in the large and artistic sense, that his fellow painters were united in their grief for his passing. Yet the paintings of this young man are virtually barred from the Metropolitan Museum. The first picture was offered by the artists. The next was presented by William P. Evans, who is one of the best known and most discriminating of American collectors of American pictures. Now a third one is offered by George A. Hearn, also a discriminating collector. Like the first and second, this gift has been refused. The excuse, or statement, is that the picture is not important enough.—*Brooklyn Eagle*.